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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001335

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ' DOMESTIC POPULARITY LARGELY UNSCATHED BY
RCTV SHUTDOWN

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary: Although recent polls suggest a majority of Venezuelans disagreed with President Chavez' shutdown of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), the decision does not appear to have significantly hurt his popularity rating. According to Datos polling firm, 67% of respondents--mostly poor and mainly Chavista--disapproved of RCTV's closure, 56% said they supported the pro-RCTV student protests, and a similar number think they should continue. Rival firm Datanalisis shows a slightly higher disapproval of the RCTV shutdown and a slight downturn in Chavez' popularity as a result of the decision. Still, Datanalisis Director Luis Vicente Leon notes there is a significant difference between an unpopular decision and an unpopular leader. He rules out a significant decline in Chavez' popularity because of RCTV. While Leon believes a possible erosion in Chavez' support could begin later this year due to Chavez' increased radicalism and populism, the Venezuelan leader is likely to hold on in the medium-to long-term absent a strong, credible opposition alternative.

"We Want Our RCTV"

12. (SBU) Results recently released by respected Venezuelan polling firm Datos indicate that a majority of Venezuelans (67%)--including 31% of Chavez' supporters--disapproved of the BRV's shut down of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV). Some 56% overall believed the decision jeopardized that freedom, but a city by city break down shows that Venezuelans are somewhat divided. Those in Greater Caracas who perceived a threat only narrowly edged out those who did not 48-46%, while in Puerto La Cruz they were outnumbered 53-41%. In the opposition bastion of Maracaibo, 77% perceived a threat. Datos' poll is based on interviews of mostly working and poor classes in eight cities from June 8-10.

13. (SBU) Datos' poll also asserted that, contrary to BRV arguments, RCTV was the most widely viewed station, with 32.8% --mostly poor--respondents listing it as their favorite channel. Venevision was close behind with 32.2%, followed by Globovision (7.7%) and state-owned VTV (7.2%). Since the shutdown, Venevision appears to have picked up some RCTV's aficionados to achieve a 44% popularity rating. Globovision also surged after the closure going from 7% to 32% as an overall favorite station. The cable news station ranked first as the preferred news source (32%), followed by

Venevision which received 29%. Forty-six percent thought Venevision had restricted coverage of many recent RCTV-related events, however. (Note: VTV was fourth again, preferred by only 8%.) When asked their hypothetical reaction to a potential BRV decision to shutter Globovision, 75% expressed disapproval.

¶4. (SBU) The poll also suggests there is support for the pro-RCTV students' marches. Some 56% said they supported the marches, including roughly 23% of Chavistas, while 23% (including 52% of Chavistas) opposed them. Fifty-one percent thought the protests should continue, while a third of respondents thought they should cease. A city by city breakdown shows the strongest support in Maracaibo, with almost 73% of that city's residents favoring continued student activism. They were followed by residents from Barquisimeto and the boarder town of San Cristobal, who supported continued protests 70% and 63%, respectively. Figures for Caracas were not given.

¶5. (SBU) Government reaction to the protests was viewed negatively. Datos found that almost 60% of those polled disagreed with Chavez' response to the protest. A tracking poll by opposition-sympathetic firm Hinterlaces indicates that 65% doubt the United States is behind the demonstrations, despite the BRV's incessant accusations.

Disappointment Still Not Enough to Hurt Chavez

¶6. (C) Despite public disapproval over the RCTV issue, Datanalisis Director Luis Vicente Leon thought the issue would have little impact on Chavez' popularity rating. Datanalisis' tracking polls have recorded a slightly higher rejection rate of RCTV's closure than Datos (75-80%), and a slight drop in the Venezuelan leader's popularity. Leon told Poloff June 20 that this was probably the first time that

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Chavez' arbitrary decisionmaking had affected his own followers. Still, Leon quickly stressed that there was a difference between an unpopular decision and an unpopular leader. He discounted the possibility that the decision marked the beginning of a precipitous decline in Chavez' popularity rating, noting that Chavez' popularity is still above the 2003 low point recorded by the firm. Furthermore, Leon thought the protests would only have an impact in the medium- to long-term, at best. He dismissed comparisons of the pro-RCTV students with the Group of 28 and commented that the BRV student leaders seemed to be more charismatic and better orators.

¶7. (SBU) Even Hinterlaces president Oscar Schemel, whose firm's most recent poll shows Chavez' popularity at 31%, its lowest point in five years, has publicly said that Chavez' current ratings "do not mean a long-term rupture" in his popularity. Leon likened the shutdown's impact to a "scrape" versus a cut or serious bruise. He thinks Chavez realizes that he may have pushed the envelope too far with the decision and will wait for emotions to die down during Copa America soccer tournament, which Venezuela is currently hosting. Datos found that Venezuelans are almost split as to whether the event will be a sufficient distraction.

2007 Outlook Grim

¶8. (C) Leon thought Chavez would continue to become more autocratic during the second half of 2007, prompting a slow erosion in his popularity. He explained that as Chavez struggles to maintain public support and contain fissures within his fractured political movement, he will be forced to take more populist and politically radical moves. These moves in turn will cost Chavez popularity, particularly as

his efforts to increase state control over the economy lead to more shortages and other economic problems. Leon was less certain about the prospects for repression, as he did not believe the military would ever be willing to turn against the people. Leon was skeptical about the potential for an opposition resurgence, noting that the fact they are playing only a behind-the-scenes role in the student protests shows how debilitated they are.

Comment

19. (C) While there are conflicting claims on Venezuelan pollsters' accuracy and bias, the Datos poll suggests the RCTV shut-down struck a personal chord with many Venezuelans, but not a political one. If true, prospects for successful demonstrations in the future are probably limited, barring major Chavista miscues. Other economic issues, such as mounting food shortages and inflation, as well as Chavez' continued efforts to centralize power, are generating discontent that over time will start to slowly eat away at Chavez' popularity. Absent a credible opposition contender able to replicate his connection to the masses, provide a plausible alternative, and capitalize on frustration with his administration, however, Chavez is likely to continue his hold on power for the foreseeable future.

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